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ABSTRACT

Creative methods of communicating with young children are discussed. In order to communicate through talk, adults must realize that children have a "secret world" with their own language and reasoning and must respect it. Self awareness, patience, understanding, and consistency are necessary for adults to truly communicate with children through talk. "Toy talk" is useful for reducing adult dominance and approaching the child on his own level. Sociodramatic play gives children practice in interacting with other children and thus improves his ability to communicate verbally. Children often respond more willingly and communicate more easily through singing instead of talking, but adults should not attempt to change songs children create. The Mutual Storytelling Technique is an effective projective method of communication, enabling children to use one of their favorite modes of communication and adults to introduce new ideas without being coercive. Non-verbal communication--through movement and music-- is also effective with young children. Communication through reading books can be effective--if the appropriate books are chosen, if they are read as though the thing is happening, and if adult dominance is reduced. Children must be free to ask questions. Communicating with the silent child is especially difficult but can be accomplished, perhaps with a non-verbal method. (KM)

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CREATIVITY IN COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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In many ways, creativity and communication are very much alike -- especially if you are thinking of children under six. During the first six years of a child's life much of his creative energy is devoted to communication -- making sense out of what others say and do and making what he does and says make sense to them. The remainder of his creative energy is devoted mainly to trying to find out things. And even then, when he finds out something he wants to communicate it to somebody.

What Is Creativity?

A quick look at some of the best definitions of creativity makes obvious the similarity between creativity and communication.

Most definitions of creativity emphasize the discovery of new relationships, new meanings, new connections. For example, Kubie defines the creative process as follows:

> ...by the creative process we mean the capacity to find new and unexpected connections, to voyage freely over the seas, to happen on America as we seek new routes to India, to find new relationships in time and space, and thus new meanings" (1958, p. 141).

Aren't these also important characteristics of genuine communication?

Most definitions of creativity emphasize the importance of awareness. Rollo May defines the creative act as "encounter characterized by a high degree of awareness" (1959, p. 61). It is the suddenness of this awareness that bursts upon one that causes the surprise associated both with creativity and communication. Jerome Bruner defines creativity

PS 006820

as "an act that produces effective surprise" (1962, p. 3) and that effective surprise is the hallmark of creative behavior.

Hans Selye's definition also emphasizes the element of surprise. He maintains that creative discoveries possess, to a high degree and simultaneously, the following three qualities: "they are true not merely as facts but also in the way they are interpreted, they are generalizable and they are surprising in the light of what was known at the time of the discovery" (1960, p. 142). Can you accept these three criteria as necessary in genuine communication? Think about it for a moment! Does the application of these three criteria -- true, generalizable, and surprising -- cause you to think of genuine communication in a different way, a deeper way?

Now, let us see what these definitions of creativity can help us find out about creative ways of communicating with children.

When Does Talk Communicate?

We usually assume that we communicate whenever we talk. This is far from the truth, especially if you are talking about children under six. There are many reasons why talk so frequently fails to communicate. Many children do not do what they are instructed to do because they do not understand the basic concepts used in the instructions -- concepts like "under," "through," "longest," and the like. There are, of course, many other reasons why children do not follow instructions. There are also reasons why they do not communicate their feelings, questions, and ideas. The entertainer, Art Linkletter (1959), has made us aware of the "secret world of kids."

Perhaps we might learn something about communicating with children from Linkletter. He maintains that children really do live in a secret world and that if we are going to communicate with them about their world we must respect that world. He describes it as a world of half fantasy and half reality. There is more imagination in this world than Jules Verne or Walt Disney ever dreamed of and there is more humor than any professional comedian could get from a whole stable of gag writers. He likens this secret world to a four-year old being given a lime lollipop and putting it aside after a thoughtful lick with the comment, "It'll be all right when it gets ripe."

Linkletter thinks adults can enter this secret world and that children will communicate about it. The key, he says, is a genuine love of kids and a little patience and understanding. With these comes a realization that there <u>are</u> two worlds. Children are <u>not</u> miniature adults. They think, feel, talk, and act in their own way. They have their own language and their own reasons for behaving as they do. These are seldom grown-up reasons. Children will give you their reasons and share their secret world, only if you are willing to respect those reasons and that world.

In his interview programs, Linkletter demonstrated that children's way of communicating can be very powerful if you take it just like it comes out and don't "monkey" with it. Who should correct the three-year-old who said, in describing her achievements, "I can put the bread in the toaster, but I can't flush it!"? Who would want to change this description of a five-year-old looking at a pond ruffled by a breeze, "Look, Mommy, the lake's getting a permanent!"?

Linkletter's program frequently showed how puzzled children are by

the secret worlds of the adults around them -- puzzling, secret worlds not communicated. For example, look what happened when he interviewed a five-year-old girl about what her mother did for fun.

"She plays golf," the five-year-old said. "With a strange man."

"A strange man?" Linkletter echoed. "Don't you know who he is?"

She shook her head. "Nobody knows who he is," she said darkly.

At this point Linkletter thought he had better change the subject and asked briskly, "Any other news?"

"Well," she said, "Mamma's going to have a baby, but no one knows why."

The answer to these mysteries are doubtless quite simple. The child's mother was taking golf lessons from the club pro and her parents had been so evasive about the mother's pregnancy that she thought "no one knew why."

Linkletter offers the following sensible guidelines for adults who would like to enter the secret world of kids and communicate through talking:

1. Take a good look at yourself -- share your world.
2. Be relaxed.
3. Assert your authority -- don't be terrified by children.
4. Don't expect miracles -- try to remember how the world looks to a child.
5. Don't change signals in mid-stream -- it's too confusing to children.
6. Give children the right amount of love -- love is not domineering and possessive.

Another approach to communicating with children creatively is "toy talk" developed by Bob Strom (1970).

Strom's invention of "toy talk" was inspired by his observations that adults frequently establish conditions that make dialogue with children improbable. He observed that adults in trying to talk with children denied the reality of children's experience, were coercive and dominant in their relationships, and failed to make use of the children's imagination. Gradually Strom and his associates have developed "toy talk" into a powerful tool for creative teaching and communicating for both parents and teachers. In developing their methods they sought to:

minimize adult dominance and yet increase teaching output

generate curriculum relevant for both the child and the adult

encourage desired affective behaviors

quickly assess comprehension gains

sustain adult motivation.

The use of toys seems ideal in achieving these goals. Even in the early days of Strom's experimental work it became clear that toy talk engenders respect for creativity, provides immediate feedback, and corrects without embarrassment.

Both teachers and parents experienced certain rather common difficulties in developing skills of communicating through toy talk. They found it difficult to give up their low evaluation of the importance of play and had trouble defining words by toy acting. They lacked ability to pretend and refused to accept the imaginative power of the children. For example, five-year old Greg wanted to drive his toy truck to Africa to join a safari and his adult partner dismissed the adventure by saying

PS 006370

that Africa is across the ocean and trucks cannot travel by water. Stephen explained that a man in a crash between two toy trucks was not hurt because he wore a brick coat, but his adult partner insisted on urging the value of safety belts. Maria's creativity was cut off when her adult partner compelled her to remove the toy policeman from a group of toy cowboys because "he's sort of a misfit."

Strom and his associates, however, have found that these skills can be learned by parents and teachers with practice.

A small group method similar to "toy talk" is Sara Smilansky's (1968) "Sociodramatic Play" technique. This method involves children in play with one another and with an adult as a kind of facilitator of communication. In sociodramatic play, a child draws from his knowledge of situations and people, and plays a role with his peers. His social experiences and observations are combined in an interaction with other children. Smilansky and others have found that disadvantaged children under six do not engage in sociodramatic play on their own but that they can be taught to do so. In doing so, they improve their abilities to communicate verbally.

In sociodramatic play, through talking, gesture, and movement the muscles of the child's whole system are involved in a common enterprise. A part of the improvement in verbal communication results from the child's culling of new words and concepts from the vocabularies and experiences of the other participants. Smilansky argues that the role- and theme-related speech during sociodramatic play enriches the play itself and adds sources of satisfaction absent in action-oriented play.

Is Singing Better Than Talking?

Many mothers have discovered independently and quite by accident that "singing is better than talking" for communication with children under six. The children will obey instructions that are sung better than they will instructions that are spoken. In turn, the children will tell more about their feelings and ideas through singing than they will by speech. On Sunday mornings I find that the four- and five-year olds that my wife and I work with will leave their individual games and playing more willingly and come to refreshments or worship, if I sing (as bad as that is) than if I try to persuade them by talking or even yelling.

I became interested in the possibility that "singing might be better than talking" through Kathleen Wrenn back in 1958. When her son Robert was about two-years-old, Mrs. Wrenn discovered that he would respond much more readily to suggestions and instructions that were sung to him than he did when the same requests were spoken. Soon, he began to respond by singing himself and he rapidly developed a sense of rhythm and a singing scale. When Robert was about four-years-old, the idea of making a book of songs began taking shape. These were simple songs about everyday happenings -- songs about the fireman, the milkman, the zoo, balloons, traffic signals, and the church bell (B. & K. Wrenn, 1949).

With new experiences, Bobby would think of ideas for songs and work them out and deeper communication would take place. On one occasion, his mother asked him to put leaves over the tulips planted in the yard

so that they would not freeze. He came back with the following idea for a song:

Here come the flowers out of the ground.
Spreading happiness all around,
Daffodils, hyacinths, tulips gay,
Oh, how I wish you were here to stay!

Mrs. Wrenn suggested that "hyacinth" was a very difficult word for little children to sing and why not say "daisies" instead. He replied, "I'm a little child aren't I and it's my word." (Yes, children dislike for others to tamper with their compositions, works of art, and the like. When adults tamper with children's creations, they don't say what the child wants to communicate and frequently the communication is spoiled.)

Communication among children under six can be deepened through their song making. I have experimented with a number of techniques both for making up songs out of the ongoing experiences of children and extending songs that they already know (1968ab).

The cinquain provides a good format for getting groups of children to communicate their concepts and feelings regarding something. For example, if I wanted a group of four- or five-year olds to communicate their feelings and concepts about fog, or breakfast, or books, I might have them make up a five-line poem about the topic. I would have them brainstorm the words for the poem first. Let's say the poem will be about "fog." The first line will be the title. For the second line, we would brainstorm all of the words that describe "fog" -- words that tell what a fog is. Then we would choose the two words that describe "fog" best. Next, we would brainstorm words that tell what fog does -- action words.

For the third line we would select the three words that tell best what fog does. For the fourth line, we would brainstorm all of the words we can think of that express feeling about fog -- the adverbs. Then we would select the four words that best describe our feelings about the fog. Finally, for the last line we would try to find one word that "adds it all up." Usually, this procedure brings out the children's concepts of fog and also their emotional reactions to it.

Is Projection Communication?

In working with adults, psychologists have long relied upon "projective methods" to help them to communicate their feelings, ideas, and thoughts. Adults who are unable to tell the psychologist or psychiatrist about their feelings, experiences, and thoughts are asked to make up stories about pictures, draw pictures, tell what they see in ink blots, and the like. In doing this, they communicate to the psychologist or psychiatrist things that they are unable to tell him. Similarly, children communicate a great deal through their creative productions -- stories, drawings, dramatics, movement, dance, and the like.

Frequently, teachers and parents do not like what is communicated when young children begin expressing their feelings through these media. For example, one of my students who is now teaching young black, disadvantaged children has been working hard to get these children to tell stories. She has succeeded but their stories are so filled with killing, violence, and hostility that she is disturbed. I suggested that she try Richard A. Gardner's "Mutual Storytelling Technique" (1971). This is a therapeutic technique that Gardner has devised to help children communicate their feelings and ideas and to find better alternatives for violence

and hostile behavior.

In the "Mutual Storytelling Technique" Gardner uses a tape recorder and has the child tell a story to an imaginary television audience and then lets him enjoy listening to the playback. The procedure is introduced to the child as a make-believe "Make-up-a-Story Television Program." The child is told that he must tell the story that he is making up right there at that moment and that after the story is told he must tell what lesson the story teaches. The child is also told that his story will be followed by one made up by the master of ceremonies, the therapist.

Almost any teacher of children under six possesses most of the skills required for using the "Mutual Story-telling Technique" and can learn fairly easily the others. As master of ceremonies, the teacher builds up the program by introducing the child to his audience as though an active audience were present. This gives the teacher a chance to acknowledge the child's creative potentialities and strengthen his self concept. The teacher has to be ready to provide help when there is a lag in the child's story. He must have a good memory for the details of the story as it was told and be able to improvise a new story based on immediate interpretation of the child's story.

Gardner has found that most children respond to this technique; they enjoy both telling and listening to the stories. He believes that storytelling is one of the child's favorite modes of communication and that adults can communicate to children in the same mode. The adult's story contains the same characters in a similar setting, but he introduces healthier solutions and resolutions of the conflicts contained in the child's story. Since the adult speaks in the child's own language, he has a good chance of "being-heard" -- of communicating.

In creating his story, the adult attempts to provide the child with a larger number of alternatives. He tries to communicate to the child that he need not be enslaved by his unhealthy behavior. He tries to open to the child new avenues not considered in the child's scheme of things. In similar ways, the visual arts, creative dramatics, creative movement, and the like can be used to help children find healthier alternatives in coping with life.

Can Communication Be Non-Verbal?

Although I have referred rather vaguely to non-verbal communication as in the visual arts, creative movement, and the like, I have not answered the question, "Can communication be non-verbal?". My answer is a definite "Yes!". However, I must admit that there are times when I fail to acknowledge non-verbal communication and tend not to recognize it as legitimate communication. In a verbally-oriented society, it is difficult to do.

In one of our creativity workshops for disadvantaged children, one of the leaders complained to my wife on the last day of the workshop, "One thing that bothers me most about these children is that they never say, 'Thank you!'". My wife immediately called one of the boys to her and gave him a balloon. The boy took the balloon eagerly, with a big grin and went gleefully away to play with the balloon. My wife then asked the leader, "Did he say, 'Thank you'"? The leader then said, "Now, I see what you mean." We are so accustomed to saying the "right" words whether they mean anything -- yes, communicate anything -- that we forget what honest communication is.

In introducing creative movement to children and getting them to "read" one another's non-verbal communication, I say something like the following (Torrance, 1968c):

> Many of the things you tell others, you say with the movements of your body. The movements you make with your hands, fingers, arms, head, eyes, lips, feet, toes, and legs express your feelings, wants, fears, and hopes. Sometimes you do not know you are telling all these things but you are.
>
> Before you could talk, you depended almost completely on these ways of expressing your feelings and telling people what you wanted. Now that you can talk, you use words that say what you want to tell others...

After this the children make movements to show how their pets and other animals feel and how they tell others what they want. I also let them practice movements as I read books like If You Were An Eel, How Would You Feel? (Simon & Simon, 1963). I also have them listen to music and try to say with bodily movement what they think the music is saying. Finally, they try their hands at communicating with one another through movement.

Can Adults and Children Communicate Through Books?

The reading of books provides an excellent medium for communicating with children, if the books are chosen with care and are read as though the thing is happening and if the adult is willing to relinquish some of his role of dominance. It has taken me some time to learn how to read a book with preprimary children. For example, when I first began reading books to four- and five-year olds, they would demand that a book be read a second or a third time. At first, I thought that the second or third reading should be fast or else they would become bored. Soon, I learned that the opposite was true, They wanted the first reading to be fast.

What they wanted the second time was to talk about the book, relate it to their experiences, and ask questions about the things not answered by the story or the pictures.

Certain books seem to communicate especially well at certain developmental stages. For example, the need for cooperation and teamwork can be communicated to three-year olds through How Joe the Bear and Sam the Mouse Got Together by de Regniers (1965). Perhaps it is the level of cooperation of Joe the Bear and Sam the Mouse that seem reasonable to three-year olds -- that of getting together at three o'clock to eat ice cream. At age four, most children get the message of Impatient Jonathan by Smaridge (1964). However, it is not until about age five that Pals by Melissa Dow Funk communicates very well.

Genuine communication with children is difficult unless the children are free to ask questions about the things that puzzle them -- and there are plenty of things about the books we read to them that do puzzle them. In my work with children, I have tried to invent a variety of methods for encouraging and facilitating question asking. One of my favorite techniques involves the use of a puppet representing one of the main characters in a story. One that I enjoy a great deal is Fisher's Listen Rabbit (1964). It is about a boy who wants to make friends with a rabbit. Although he cannot make friends with the rabbit, he keeps wondering what the rabbit is doing when there is a full moon at night, when it rains, when it snows, and when the hunters with their dogs go through the woods. Finally, he makes friends with the rabbit when he finds her newborn babies in a fur-lined nest in the spring. After reading the book, I use a rabbit puppet and pose as the rabbit who will answer their questions. They may

start with the questions that the boy in the story asked and this is all right. It satisfies curiosity that has been aroused already. Soon, however, they get into deeper questions involving their own experiences, fears, and worries.

How Do You Communicate with the Silent Child?

Almost any kind of creative experience offers opportunities for genuine communication with children under six. Before closing, however, I must say something about the child who has stopped communicating. He refuses to talk and communicates very little through any means. How do you communicate with such a child? I must answer that I do not know, but I believe that there is a way to communicate with any child. If every child has some degree of creativity, communication is possible with every child. It takes love, patience, and even respect for the child's right not to communicate. You have to keep trying to find the situation, the time, the way to free him to communicate.

It may not happen until after he is six. This was the case with Scotty. Scotty would never talk in Sunday School. When he started to school at age six, he still refused to talk and he "flunked first grade." His Sunday School teacher at this time was a very sensitive and alert man with a large repertoire of creative teaching methods. The key with Scotty proved to be clay. In using the clay Scotty showed an aliveness that he had never shown before. He liked the clay. He liked what he made with the clay. He talked about what he made. He was eager to see that the clay was stored away safely for next Sunday. Once he had become "unlocked" and began communicating, Scotty began learning to read and progressed through school with no more difficulty.

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